Birds in the Americas Will No Longer Be Named After People

The American Ornithological Society has committed to replacing all bird names derived from people so as not to honor figures with racist pasts.

Share full article

The Scott's oriole, native to the Southwest and Mexico, was named after the U.S. Civil War general Winfield Scott, who oversaw the forced relocation of Indigenous peoples in 1838 that eventually became the Trail of Tears. Rolf Nussbaumer/Alamy

By Katrina Miller

Nov. 1, 2023, 9:00 a.m. ET

The American Ornithological Society, which is the organization responsible for standardizing English bird names across the Americas, announced on Wednesday that it would rename all species honoring people. Bird names derived from people, the society said in a statement, can be harmful, exclusive and detract from "the focus, appreciation or consideration of the birds themselves."

That means the Audubon's shearwater, a bird found off the coast of the southeastern United States, will no longer have a name acknowledging James John Audubon, a famous bird illustrator and a slave owner who adamantly opposed abolition. The Scott's oriole, a black-and-yellow bird inhabiting the Southwest and Mexico, will also receive a new moniker, which will sever ties to the U.S. Civil War general Winfield Scott, who oversaw the forced relocation of Indigenous peoples in 1838 that eventually became the Trail of Tears.

The organization's decision is a response to pressure from birders to redress the recognition of historical figures with racist or colonial pasts. The renaming process will aim for more descriptive names about the birds' habitats or physical features and is part of a broader push in science for more welcoming, inclusive environments.

"We're really doing this to address some historic wrongs," said Judith Scarl, the executive director of the American Ornithological

Society. Dr. Scarl added that the change would help “engage even more people in enjoying and protecting and studying birds.”

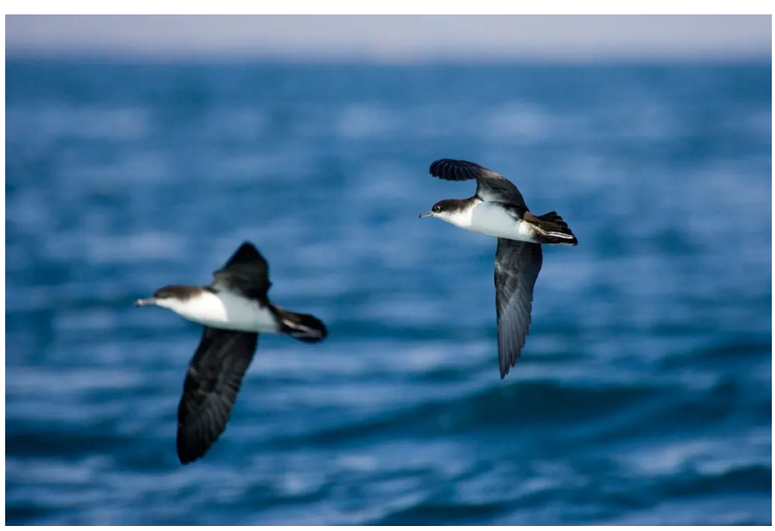
Advocates of this change believe that many English common names for birds are “isolating and demeaning reminders of oppression, slavery and genocide,” according to a petition in 2020 that was addressed to the American Ornithological Society. The petition was written by Bird Names For Birds, an initiative founded by two ornithologists to confront the issue of these bird names, which it describes as “verbal statues” reflecting the values of their eponyms.

How to Become a Birder

Start from the basics. Begin with something foundational: Learn to identify a few of the birds most commonly seen near where you live. Digital tools like the Merlin Bird ID app can help. If you spot a bird, pay attention to things like the size, color, behavior, location and date. Binoculars and field guides might help, but are not necessary to get started.

Jordan Rutter, a founder of Bird Names For Birds, said the petition was inspired by what became a momentous encounter in Central Park in 2020, when a white woman falsely reported to police that Christian Cooper, a Black birder, was threatening her life.

“It wasn’t a wake-up call,” Ms. Rutter said, but brought “long-known but not highlighted issues to the forefront of the bird community.”



The Audubon’s shearwater will receive a different name under the American Ornithological Society’s new rules. David Hosking/Alamy

The Central Park encounter inspired the creation of Black Birders Week, an annual campaign to celebrate the lives and careers of Black birders, which then spurred an avalanche of similar initiatives in the sciences against the backdrop of a nationwide racial reckoning. In 2021, the Entomological Society of America began the Better Common Names Project to change the names of insects deemed inappropriate or derogatory. Astronomers have also advocated for the renaming of major telescopes that they say alienate people from marginalized backgrounds.

In birding communities, pushes to move away from problematic bird names have produced mixed results. The Bird Union and the Chicago Bird Alliance recently changed their names to avoid an

association with Audubon. But the board of directors at the National Audubon Society voted to retain its name this year, saying that the mission of the organization transcended the history of one person.

In 2022, the American Ornithological Society announced the formation of an ad hoc committee to determine how to address controversial bird names. Members of the committee met every two weeks for months, discussing topics such as the importance of name stability and how to determine the criteria for changing a bird's name.

Wednesday's announcement is the culmination of that effort. In its statement, the American Ornithological Society committed to changing all bird names derived from people and assembling a diverse group to oversee the renaming process, which it said would include input from the general public. More than 100 avian species across the Americas will be given new names.

"The idea of changing a bunch of names is, to many people — myself included, originally — throwing out a lot of history," said John Fitzpatrick, an ornithologist at Cornell University. He said that he initially felt bird names should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis but that further discussions convinced him that "there is no formula by which we can figure out which names are good enough."

Notably, only the common English names of birds will change, since scientific names — which are traditionally in Latin — are governed by a rigid, universal set of rules that take into account evolutionary relationships between different species. (Latin designations taken from people's names exist as well, such as Capito fitzpatricki for the Sira barbet, a Peruvian bird named after Dr. Fitzpatrick.)

The bird soon to be formerly known as a Wilson's warbler. Changing its name to something like black-capped warbler would give birders a better idea of what to look for, said Christian Cooper, a birder and television host. Eric Wengert/Alamy

The decision to change common names of birds "makes perfect sense" to Mr. Cooper, whose fame has led him to hosting a National Geographic birding show. "There's no reason to have a person's name attached to a bird, because it doesn't tell you anything about the bird," he said.

Mr. Cooper mentioned the Wilson's warbler, a canary songbird with a characteristic black cap. Changing the name to something "like black-capped warbler," he said, would give birders a better idea of

what to look for.

More on Birds

- **The Flight of Their Lives:** Many of the birds that spend their summers in the United States are preparing to fly south. Here's where they're headed — and why it matters.
- **National Audubon Society:** A conflict within the bird enthusiasts' organization over its handling of race raises the question: Should bird conservation have anything to do with social justice?
- **'Birds Are My Eyesight':** For some blind birders, avian soundscapes are a way to map the world around them. Increasing noise pollution is imperiling that navigation.

The American Ornithological Society plans to pilot a renaming program next year, starting with around 10 birds. Eventually, the program will expand to address all namesake birds in the United States and Canada, and then move on to avian species in Central and South America, which is the extent of the society's naming jurisdiction.

Carlos Daniel Cadena, an ornithologist at the University of the Andes in Colombia and a leader of the English Bird Names Committee, expects the changes to entail a slight learning curve but also present a new opportunity for the public to bond over birds.

"It's going to be a level playing field where we all need to learn together," Dr. Cadena said.

He noted that the process might be adjusted for birds in Latin American countries, where people commonly refer to them by their scientific names.

With thousands of species across the Americas, birds are as diverse as the communities that cherish them. "Birds are by far the most accessible and beloved feature in biodiversity worldwide," said Dr. Fitzpatrick. He added that more colorful names for these creatures would heighten "the ease by which new birders of every stripe" can enjoy them.

Katrina Miller is a science reporting fellow for The Times. She recently earned her Ph.D. in particle physics from the University of Chicago. More about Katrina Miller